



# Harper's Magazine

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VOL. CXLIX

OCTOBER, 1924

No. DCCCXCHII

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## POLITICS—A TWO-HANDED GAME

*Reflections on Campaigns, Ancient and Modern*

BY ELMER DAVIS

You have got to take it out of politics or you can't win.—*From the remarks of the Honorable Key Pittman, United States Senator from Nevada, before the Democratic National Convention.*

THE old-style partisan used to say, and seems even to have believed, that he was a partisan because parties meant principles, not men. But that argument is not heard this year from any of the three parties competing for the favor of the voters. Mr. William Z. Foster's home-brewed Bolshevik party is running on a set of very definite and controversial principles, and the wise men expect it to get about fifty thousand votes out of a possible fifty million. But the orators of the other three parties are saying much about candidates and little about principles for the excellent reason that each of the three has a candidate for whom much may be said, while none of them has any principles at all. To this extent at least American politics is getting back to its best tradition.

Of course there are earnest citizens who complain loudly because there is no difference of principles between the

parties. The only visible difference of any sort is that the Republican party seems to contain a slightly higher percentage of crooks, and the Democratic party of fools. How about the third party? Well, the third party—in its platform, at least—has done its best to avoid controversial questions and to prove that it is just like any other party. Its stock in trade is an able and popular candidate and a sectional and occupational discontent; and its managers, with excellent judgment, are trying to leave it at that. This has annoyed serious-minded publicists who feel that there is no particular gain in substituting for Tweedledum and Tweedledee the indistinguishable trinity of Tweedledum, Tweedledee, and Tweedleda, but it shows good sense on the part of the third party's leaders. If nothing else, this year's three national conventions proved that.

For in all the duration of American history only one third party has endured, and it endured by swallowing one of its antagonists and becoming the first party.

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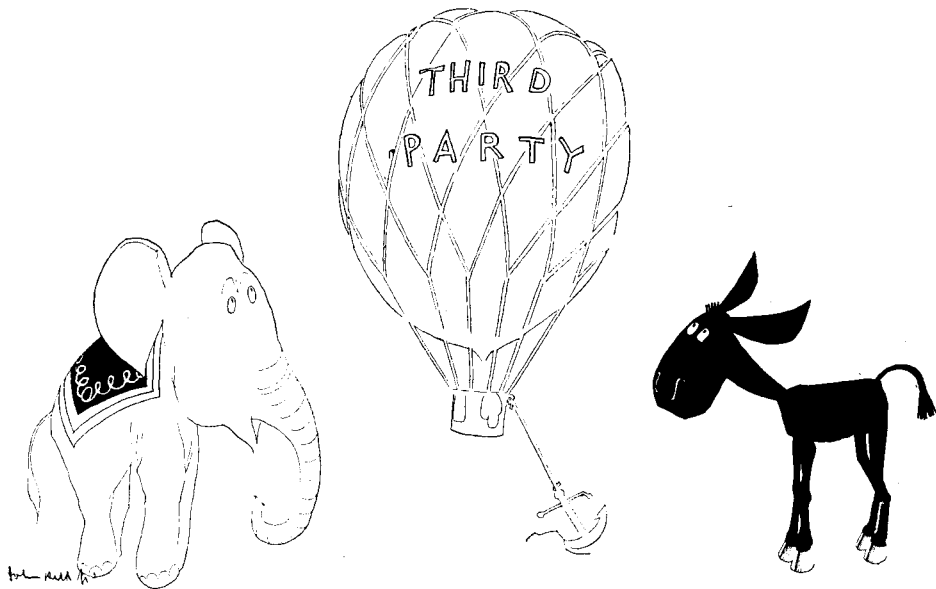
Third parties are born of an issue and fed on discontent. Commonly they die when hard times are over and discontent disappears. The issue goes on and is fought out, but not on partisan lines. For the object of a party is not the triumph of an issue but the acquisition and retention of jobs, honors, and emoluments by the people who run the party. A party based on an issue is ruined whether it wins or loses. If its issue is finally rejected, the men whose political fortunes are tied up with that issue are finally rejected too. If its issue triumphs, there is no further reason for the party. Senator La Follette sees this, and having plenty of discontent to work with, is trying to escape entanglement with an issue.

The one exception among American third-party movements is of course the enduring success of the Republicans. But that was due to the double accident of war and victory. The Republican party was founded to fight for the issue of limiting the expansion of slavery. There is grave doubt if any political organization was needed for that purpose; if slavery had been introduced in the West it would probably have died a natural death of its own unprofitableness, as it did in the Northeastern states. But in any case, if the Republican party had succeeded in definitely and finally confining slavery to the fifteen slave states of 1860—still more, if it had abolished slavery—it would have had no more justification for existence. Its enemies saved it by starting a war after its first electoral triumph. After the war the Republicans were virtually without opposition for a decade, thus gaining time to reorganize as a party which represented nothing in particular but one of the most fundamental of human instincts—the desire to live off the public trough. By the time political conditions returned to normal in the middle seventies, the Democratic party also represented nothing but the desire to live off the public trough. Once or twice—in 1896 and in 1920—the Democrats made

the fatal mistake of tying themselves up with a real issue, and the consequences have taught them not to do it again. In this pleasing rivalry the parties have lived and thriven ever since, while non-partisan or bi-partisan action takes care of the issues.

For the two-party system has proved itself the best means of getting things done—not, necessarily, of getting done the things about which people get excited, but of carrying on the business of government without too much waste or corruption. On the continent of Europe a group system of small parties, each of which, as a rule, represents a specific issue or a specific interest, has paralyzed democratic government and driven the nations either to dictatorships or, as in France, to what amounts to a two-party system. The French Right, to be sure, is a coalition, and so is the French Left. But the Republican party was a coalition until La Follette broke away, and is likely before long to be a coalition again. For the last half century the Democratic party has been a coalition between a Southern agrarian interest and a North-eastern industrial working-class interest, elements fortunately so discordant that the party has been spared the impossible task of trying to stand united for anything in particular until a few idealists came to the New York convention and imperiled a brilliant prospect of material success by trying to tie up the party with moral issues.

Andrew Jackson showed a sure perception of the practical realities of Democratic government when he went to the White House on the slogan of "Turn the rascals out." Democracy, inefficient enough under any system, is least inefficient when it operates through two indistinguishable and arbitrary divisions of the politically interested citizen body. One set of rascals, becoming insufferable, can be turned out and replaced by the other set of rascals whose own self-interest will keep them for some years from being quite as bad as their predecessors. When they forget and in



HOW ABOUT THE THIRD PARTY?

their turn become insufferable, they can be replaced by the first set of rascals, now chastened by enforced retirement and willing to behave with reasonable virtue for a term or two. That is what has happened in this country during the past sixty years. But the whole process would have been upset if either party had stood for an issue.

The La Follette people, seeing this and being animated by the same powerful motive of self-interest which inspires all politicians, realize that their best chance is to absorb and replace either Democrats or Republicans as the Republicans once absorbed and replaced the Whigs. Substitute Tweedleda for either Tweedledum or Tweedledee. Three parties are confusing enough to the voter, but the confusion would be ruinous if any of the three represented a result of definite opinions. The two-party system corresponds to the basic instincts of human nature—but it must be two parties neither of which stands for anything in particular, parties that mean men, not principles. If an example is needed, take it from that inexhaustible storehouse of moral illustration—the history of Rome.

Everybody knows that Rome fell. That is not exactly true, but since everybody knows it, it may be taken for granted. What few people remember is that New Rome—Constantinople, and the eastern half of the old Roman Empire which centered about Constantinople—stood for a thousand years after Rome had been retired to the guide books. Since every preacher and reformer and politician in American history has drawn moral lessons, usually wrong, from the fall of Rome, it may be permissible to draw a moral lesson from the persistence of Constantinople, whose thousand years of stability make a record unparalleled in the history of European government. That stability was due largely to the fact that political life in Constantinople was organized on the basis of two parties which had nothing to do with issues and principles, parties no more different than Democrats and Republicans—the Blues and the Greens.

There had been parties in the Roman republic. There were personal factions and groups representing class interests, but in the main, republican Rome had

two great parties divided along the most natural line of cleavage. On the one side, those who had money and wanted to keep it; on the other, those who didn't have it and wanted to get it—conservatives and radicals. Because they represented a genuine and fundamental difference of opinion, they took their politics hard. When either side got the upper hand it killed off all the leaders of the other side within reach. Naturally, after this had gone on for a hundred years there was a scarcity of political leaders and a general lack of enthusiasm for politics; so the country resigned itself without complaint to the strongest man in sight, who happened to combine radical antecedents and associations with a conservative temperament. Aided by the good luck of the war against Cleopatra which stirred up national patriotism, Augustus managed to assemble most of the politically minded men of Rome in a conservative-radical coalition whose sole issue was the preservation of peace and prosperity, and this was the only party of the Roman Empire.

There was, to be sure, under the first

two dynasties a fitful and absurdly ineffective protest, chiefly literary in its inspiration and manifestations, from a lunatic fringe of disgruntled republicans. These gentlemen exercised their political inclinations principally in writing admiring biographies of one another, and devising praiseworthy dying sentiments against the time when the most patient of emperors would find them too much and send them orders to commit suicide. When they had all been so disposed of, amid intense calm on the part of the population at large, there was never again an Opposition in Rome. There were murderous and finally ruinous civil wars between rival candidates for the throne, but they were supported by personal or regional—not partisan—interests. It is not true that imperial Rome had no parties because it had no political life. It had no political life because, among other reasons, it had no parties.

Rome could do without politics, but Constantinople, whose people were more excitable and less practical, could not. But by good luck (for there seems to have been no deliberate intent about it)

political feeling in Constantinople came to center about the factions at the race track—just as if party conflicts in New York and Chicago, instead of being between Democrats and Republicans, were between Giants and Yankees, or Cubs and White Sox.

Nobody had to be either Blue or Green, any more than any of us have to enroll in a political party; but unless you were either a Blue or a Green you missed most of the excitement in Constantinople. In both parties there were rich men and poor men, conservatives and radicals, extremists and middle-of-the-roaders, crusading fanatics and Laodiceans. They differed roughly as Demo-

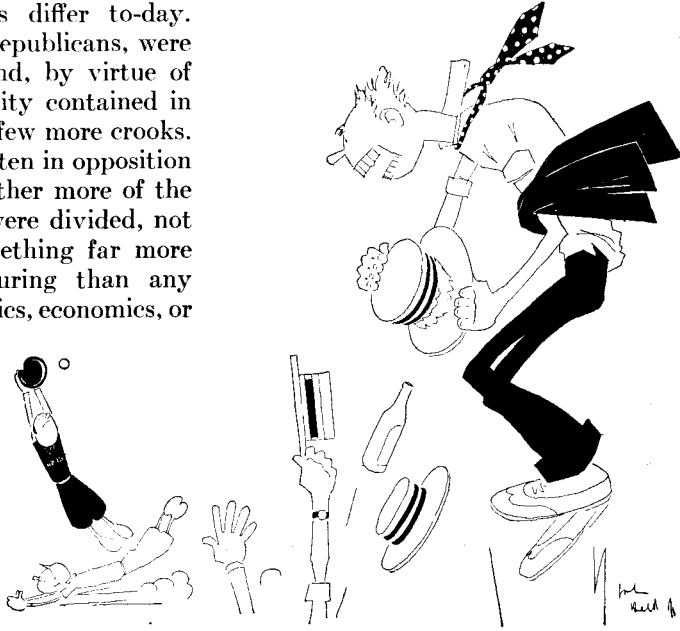


THERE WAS A SCARCITY OF POLITICAL LEADERS IN ROME

crats and Republicans differ to-day. The Greens, like the Republicans, were more often in favor and, by virtue of their greater opportunity contained in their party, perhaps, a few more crooks. The Blues were more often in opposition and hence attracted rather more of the lunatic fringe. They were divided, not by issues, but by something far more fundamental and enduring than any specific doctrine of politics, economics, or religion—by the essential human need of having a traditional enemy who can be hated and howled at, who gives an opportunity to blow off steam. That was what the race-track parties did for Constantinople—they gave its people an opportunity to

blow off, usually without injury, the steam which in Rome was repressed and contained until it eventually cooled and condensed into utter apathy to the destruction of the empire.

Nobody in Constantinople had to belong to a party, but if you were a Blue or a Green you could turn out on the big racing days, go to the track and sit among your own crowd, and listen to your official spokesman abusing the other party like a present-day keynoter. When the other side's keynoter had his turn, you could boo and hiss and heckle; and once in a long while you could engage in a riot which relieved everybody's feelings without doing any permanent damage. Meanwhile the experts in the palace carried on the government and the average man never had to worry about it. What good does it do him—or has ever done him—to worry about it? He can decide whether he prefers Coolidge or Davis or La Follette, but he can exercise no control over the successful candidate except by voting against him when he runs for re-election. At long intervals, this power



WE CHEER WILDLY FOR A SET OF OUT-OF-TOWN EXPERTS

of repudiation is effective and salutary. Just as in Constantinople, every half-century or so one or the other of the factions put over a change of ministers or even of the dynasty; but in the main political life in Constantinople consisted in cheering your own keynoter, booing the other side's, and throwing an infrequent and usually harmless brick; while the business of running the country was handled by the civil-service officials, working under the direction of Master Minds who might nominally belong to one party or the other, but were willing to use either to achieve their ends. The Constantinople party system was an excellent psychological release which rarely interfered with the administration. That is one reason why the Byzantine Empire lasted a thousand years.

For while the purpose of a party, from the viewpoint of leaders and active workers, is the acquisition and retention of public office by its leaders, for the rank and file its value is psychological. Being an independent voter requires more time

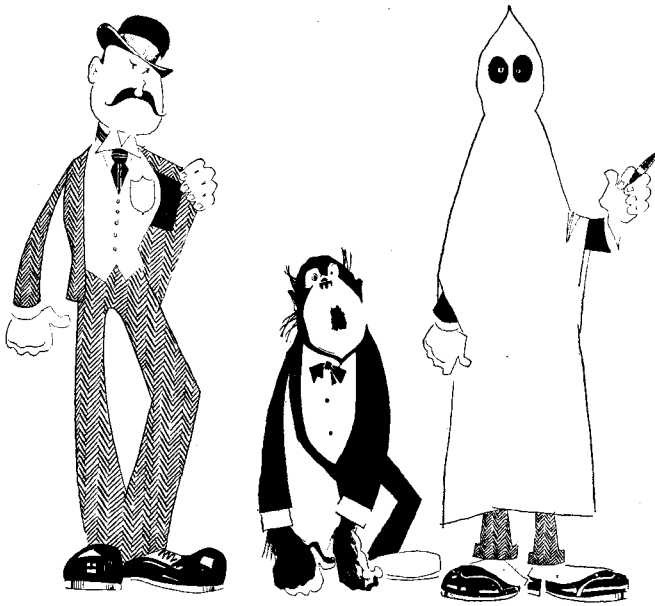
and industry, as well as more intelligence, than most of us have to give. Yet on important issues most of us are independent voters to the extent that we are not governed by an ordered concept of life which automatically decides our opinion on every question. Despite the high authority from which the saying comes, it is not true that every boy and girl alive is either a little Liberal or a little Conservative. Most of us are liberal sometimes and conservative sometimes, liberal on some issues and conservative on others. We can call ourselves liberals or conservatives only by enforcing the unit rule on a reluctant minority of our opinions.

But we are all either Blue or Green, Red or Black, High or Low, Odd or Even. The appetite for antagonism seems to be fundamental. When our ancestors assembled to perfect themselves in the art of oral spelling, they chose sides and roused the spirit of emulation so that they could work themselves up to the point of spelling not only more enthusiastically but more accurately. When the Chamber of Com-

merce or the Baraca Bible Class starts a drive for new members, the first thing is to divide the old members who are to bring in the new members into two sides—the Reds and Blues. We all work better, and work harder, if we have somebody to work against.

We all need an adversary who can be hated without going through a painful process of reasoning which may end in the conclusion that after all he is only fifty-one per cent hateworthy. We go to the Polo Grounds and cheer wildly for one set of out-of-town experts playing baseball in the name of New York as against another set of out-of-town experts playing baseball in the name of New York, and thereby get rid of much enthusiasm which might do infinite damage if directed toward some concrete end. And if any man can give a more reasoned explanation of his being a Democrat or Republican than of his being a Giant rooter or a Yankee rooter, he has never done so. He may say that he is a Republican because the Republicans are the party of intelligence and morality—the party so intelligent that it

spent two billions on the Veterans' Bureau without relieving the veterans, so moral that it seems to see nothing wrong or even surprising in the sale of Teapot Dome. He may say that he is a Democrat because he believes in popular liberties—this although Democratic states gave the most eager support to nationwide prohibition and inclined most strongly to the passing of laws forbidding the teaching of evolution. As a matter of fact he is a Democrat or a Republican because his father belonged, or his friends belong, to that party;



PROHIBITION, EVOLUTION, AND THE KLAN ARE NOT MENTIONED  
IN THE PLATFORMS





"APPLAUSE, MINGLED WITH BOOS AND HISSES"

because he found some specific social or business advantage in belonging to it, as in the case of Northern Republicans who become Democrats when they move to the South; or because he has an abstract admiration for Jefferson or Lincoln, or had a passionate personal devotion to the personality or ideals of Wilson or Roosevelt. Wilson and Roosevelt have as little to do with the Democratic and Republican parties of 1924 as have Jefferson and Lincoln; search the statements of party principle and the record of party practice, and you will find little trace of the influence of any of the four, though plenty of lip-service to these magnificent advertising assets. These and other illogical trivialities determine our choice between Tweedledum and Tweedledee, as it determined the Constantinopolitan's choice between Blues and Greens. But we, like him, have to be something or miss the excitement and relief that come from a periodical explosion of partisanship.

And naturally if there were any real difference between the parties, partisanship would be harder for the individual. He would have to think. He would have to line up with those who agree with him on what he regards as the cardinal question, and often he would find himself in

pretty queer company. He would have to think not only once but every time an issue of consequence came up, and that is more thought than most of us care to give to public affairs. In the shifting realignment of parties which this would probably entail, a man would find himself in strange company and away from home, shouting abuse at his old friends, and what is worse, saying kind things about his old enemies.

For the party the effect would, of course, be still more disastrous. You can't be for anything without being against something else. You can't win votes by taking up one side of a controversial issue without losing the votes of those who prefer the other side. In 1920 the issues about which people talked and grew angry and abusive and intolerant were prohibition, bobbed hair, and the one-piece bathing suit. They were not partisan issues, however. Bobbed hair and the one-piece bathing suit have since been settled. Prohibition, so far as human ingenuity can provide, will never be settled. The issues about which people get angry this year are prohibition, evolution, and the Klan. They are not mentioned in the platforms.

And herein, of course, the Democrats

committed one of their characteristic blunders, which had at least the useful result of making the essence of the two-party system a little clearer than before to a great many innocent voters. The question "What is a party for?" will never be asked again by any man who saw the great men of the Democratic party fluttering and sputtering like wet hens in fear that idealistic enthusiasts were going to commit the party to a definite position on a disputed question. These gentlemen were quite sincere, honestly intent on serving their party and their country. But they were professional politicians, and the major premise of every professional politician's reasoning is that the welfare of party and country depends on his being in office. Turn the rascals out and get the jobs—that is the first commandment.

Bryan's violent objection to the naming of the Klan had more behind it than Bryan's temperamental obscurantism. It was backed by Bryan's own experience. In his youth he tied the party up with certain controversial issues, and the results were disastrous both to him and to the party. In his old age he knows better. Still more illuminating was Senator Pittman's speech, a quotation from which appears at the head of this article, against too downright support of the League of Nations. Newton D. Baker had preceded him with an impassioned appeal for standing by the League, let the chips fall where they may. But Key Pittman is one of the chips and he doesn't want to fall. Like Baker, he was stirred by a great emotion—the deadly fear that prospective victory might be turned to defeat by committing the party to something definite. Certainly he was for the League, but "you have got to take it out of politics or you can't win." If the Democrats are for it the Republicans will be against it, and Heaven knows what may happen; but if the Democrats say nothing about it they may win, by virtue of public disgust with the party in office, and then

put the League over. Get the jobs and let the issues wait; seek ye first the spoils of office and all things else will be added unto you.

Key Pittman, betrayed into candor by deep feeling, is the first man in American political history who has frankly admitted that before fourteen thousand people, but it is and has been the guiding principle of political practice. For proof of that one need only consider the characteristically prudent behavior of the Republican party, which after all is the typical party, the norm to which all others approximate. The Republican convention never risked arousing dissension by going into controversial matters. Nobody can vote against the Republicans because of their stand on prohibition or evolution or the Klan, or anything else. The party which was both for and against the League in the campaign of 1920 and in which, after victory in that election, there worked together in perfect harmony a pro-League Secretary of State, an anti-League Senate leader, and a President who was for or against the League as occasion required—is as the legendary grandmother who doesn't need to be taught to suck eggs. Hughes and Hoover, for example, rightly realized that they could do more for the League—or at least no less—in office than out of office, no matter what the terms on which they got office. If the Republicans stay in office they can deal with the Klan and prohibition according to their opinions, but if they are turned out it makes no difference whether they have any opinions about the Klan and prohibition at all.

Is this the cynical self-interest of politicians who are mere parasites on the electorate? Well, if it is, the average man seems to like it. The success of the Republican party is the best recommendation for the principle of being all things to all men. The Democrats this year came very near taking a definite stand on two or three important issues, and in consequence gravely damaged



their chances of beating the Republicans, who took no stand on anything at all. John W. Davis, before his nomination, was generally known as a conservative. When he came before the convention after his nomination he seized the chance to say that he was a liberal; and most of the assembled Democrats seemed to feel that this was only good sense. He had discovered the Republican secret of avoiding issues. So has La Follette, who has been a Republican long enough to know what has made the party successful; if his new party stands for anything very definite or takes sides on a con-

troversial question, it will be his misfortune and not his fault.

And, as observed, the voters seem to like it—at least they vote for men who say nothing and against men who say something. To do otherwise would mean the devoting of thought and effort to politics, and few voters are ready to do that. “Applause, mingled with boos and hisses” was the most frequently recurrent line in the stenographic reports of the Democratic convention, and with reason. Applause, mingled with boos and hisses, is about all that the average voter is able or willing to contribute to public life.

## REQUIESCAT

BY WEIR VERNON

OH, do not say high things of her—  
Say that she loved the sun,  
But danced, light-foot, into the dark  
When day was done.

Say that, the leader of the rout  
When revelry was wild,  
She dreamed the unguessed loveliness,  
Shining and undefiled.

Say, careless and too proud for prayer,  
Alien on Calvary,  
No saint had bleeding feet like hers,  
Pursuing ecstasy.

And now, worn out with carnival—  
Glad, wine-stained thing of clay—  
Say that she finds dark slumber sweet  
After loud day